

Building women's technical skills

Need more such initiatives

IT is not always that we see women in gender non-conforming roles, such as an auto-mechanic or CNG puller. Although some NGOs have taken initiatives to support and train women for employment in male-dominated professions in the past, we are heartened to see that the government itself is playing an active role in building the technical capacities of underprivileged women.

The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (Mowca), in collaboration with UCEP, a local NGO, is providing training in technical skills such as basic computer skills, driving, auto-mechanics, dairy and poultry production, etc. We believe that this training will give its participants, many of whom are divorced and survivors of marital violence, a chance to stand on their own feet and take back control of their lives.

We applaud the women who are brave and determined enough to pursue a career in male-dominated fields. We urge employers to let go of their prejudices against women and undertake affirmative action if and when necessary to address the gender imbalance in many professions.

Currently, however, the programme is targeting only a handful of women. We hope that Mowca would implement similar programmes in the future, targeting more women from across the country.

As of now, only 10 crore taka has been spent, and only 40 crore taka approved, for enhancing women's skills and entrepreneurial capacities despite an allocated 280 crore taka in the budget during this government's tenure. As such, there is much scope for implementing programmes to enable women to successfully participate and compete in the workforce.

Our positive GHI ranking

Build up on the gain

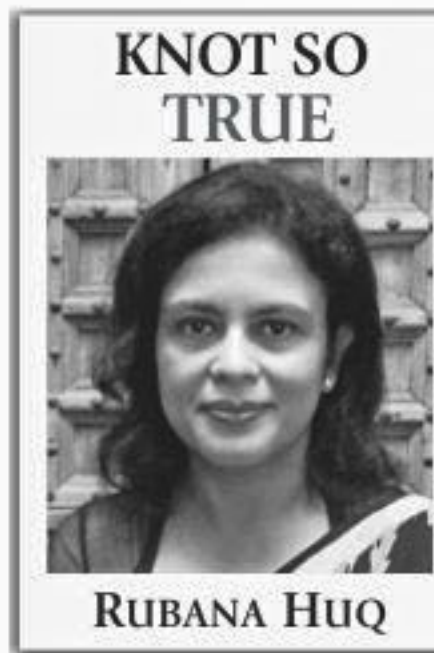
BANGLADESH'S Global Hunger Index (GHI) ranking with 57 score points is a notch better this year compared to what it was in 2013, says a study report of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).

This is no mean achievement for us seeing that it has to feed a far bigger population than nine other African and Southeast Asian nations which have ranked identically with Bangladesh.

The GHI ranking has been done on the basis of three criteria, namely, the proportion of undernourished population, proportion of below-five-year children who are underweight and mortality rate of under-five children. It is important to note here that these criteria point to what is known as 'hidden hunger' manifested through lower calorie intake leading to compromised immunity, stunted physical and mental growth of the population. In particular, the higher under-five mortality rate is reflective of a situation where malnutrition coupled unhygienic living condition put children in a life-threatening situation.

The study has further shown that over the past quarter of a century between 1990 and 2014, excepting 16 countries where the level of hunger ranges from alarming to extremely alarming, in most other developing countries including Bangladesh, the number of people going hungry has dropped by 39 per cent. In Bangladesh's case, efforts by the government as well as an active NGO sector to fight child malnutrition coupled with a strong public sector monitoring of the work has helped bring down the percentage of underweight children from 62 per in 1990 to cent to 37 per cent in

A nation on steroids



KNOT SO TRUE

RUBANA HUQ

BUY One, Get One Free: the advertisement pitch that I heard in the 'Qurbanir Haat'. If one bought a cow for 'x' amount, he or she was given another one of a smaller size. If one bought a camel, the purchaser was given a refrigerator. In Baridhara, a devout Muslim who invested Taka 1.75 lac was given a cell phone. And tell you what, the cows were unimaginably bigger than before. Many of these poor animals had been given steroids and had suddenly grown in size, just to entice the size-hungry buyers. The result has also been disastrous. Simple people like your columnist have stayed away from buying 'big' cows.

Unfortunately this nation also suffers from political and social excesses. Otherwise, how can an extremely influential statesman suddenly lose his sanity unless he or she lives off an overdose of ego? What contributes to a politician suddenly growing muscles overnight and knocking off any opposition in the ring? The answer lies in the fact of our nation perennially being on social, cultural, financial and political steroids. Yet, during application of the drug, little do we realize that steroids serve for a short-term and that a nation cannot afford to be put on steroids for life.

Ironically, every year we have been witnessing outstanding stats in our education sector while simultaneously many have been wondering about the quality of the achievement label of GPA 5. The results of the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and equivalent examinations-2014 under ten education boards announced a pass rate of 78.33 per cent compared to last year's figure of 74.30 percent. This year, 70602 students achieved the highest grade of GPA-5 while in 2013, 58197 students made it to the club of GPA-5. True, it feels great to see students making 'V' signs and being photographed and interviewed for media, but at the end of the game, how many of them really deserve to go for higher education? How many can really withstand real competition and prove their worth? The numbers would be embarrassingly low. Till date, your columnist finds it extremely challenging to recruit eligible candidates for any real life corporate position. Recent news will substantiate general fears of the citizen. Only two applicants passed the tests to enrol at Dhaka University's Department of English this year. As a result, the admission committee has decided to favour suspending the critical admission requirements, which disqualifies aspiring university students from enrolling. It seems as though the nation is in a hurry to look educated without truly being so.

The need to simply 'look' good without actually qualifying for it is a dangerous practice. Abnormally healthy steroid-fed animals, unusually fresh-looking yet formalin-injected vegetables, excessively power-driven loose-mouthed politicians, and above all, an artificially inflated and overrated generation of GPA 5 holders don't do justice to a nation that needs the Youth to steer it to a safe and shining shore.

The world today is filled with glorious chapters being authored by the Youth...

On 16 June 1976, in Soweto, 10, 000 students were mobilized by the South African Students Movement's

Action Committee and peacefully marched protesting against the government. While police fired on the peaceful students, international community was repulsed by the atrocity. The uprising spread to the whole of South Africa. The revolution in Egypt was also more of a youth uprising which resembles the democratic demands of Dr Martin L. King, Jr.

On the 19th of September 2014, in Scotland even 16 year-olds voted in the referendum on independence. Scotland's independence bid was almost as real as it could get...with the youth pushing the separation edge. "Better Together" was dangerously close to collapsing, but the 'No' vote actually just put an end to David Cameron's rounds of nightmares. The ones who saved the tie were mostly a section of mature citizens while the ones desiring the divorce were young and eager for meaningful change.

It's always the youth testing the limits of a nation. A recent development in Asia testifies this. The Occupy Central movement in Hong Kong is today being led by the youth. It is difficult to imagine restlessness in a city that breathes and thrives in corporate efficiency. Yet the young, bold and the beautiful have taken to the streets, just to press for a free and

fair election in electing their representative in 2017, which is still 3 years away. Apart from the Occupy movement, another protest led by the student protest group called Scholarism was started by 17-year-old Joshua Wong—who protested against pro-party patriotic education in Hong Kong public schools—which culminated in a boycott of classes eventually leading to a storming of government headquarters. This dissent is a forceful reminder of the Tiananmen protests in 1989. After that, this is the single-most biggest mass movement on Chinese soil with direct political connotations. One must also remind the readers that China observes a Youth Day ever since the 4th of May 1949. So, even China has to subscribe to the spirit of youth when it comes to new claims on democracy.

A couple of moons ago, we had youth strumming their chords in Shahbag. Powerful people from both position and opposition reached them, split them into a few pieces and packed the rebellion off to a place from where there was no safe return. Reality is that while the seventeen-year old Pakistani child education activist Malala shares the peace prize with an Indian child rights campaigner, Kailash Satyarthi, it's been proposed that the marriageable age for females be taken down from 18 to 16. Reality is that at a time when the world is busy celebrating youth, the nation is busy awarding Golden GPA 5 to kids who are possibly at their farthest from receiving a golden education. At a time when we should be nurturing the Young, Tanvir Ahmed Toki, who would have turned 18 last week, paid the price of political rivalry and was brutally murdered. In our land, we kill instead of nurture; we spoil instead of mentor; we hunt instead of sustain; we abandon in place of embrace...

All of this needs to change... if 71% of Bangladeshis truly believe (according to the Pew Research Center) that this is the land where their children are destined to be better off living in. More faith needs to be restored in governance and more work needs to go into building the dreamland for generations to follow.

The writer is Managing Director, Mohammadi Group.

The age of vulnerability



INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY

JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ

TWO new studies show, once again, the magnitude of the inequality problem plaguing the United States. The first, the US Census Bureau's annual income and poverty report, shows that, despite the economy's supposed recovery from the Great Recession, ordinary Americans' incomes continue to stagnate. Median household income, adjusted for inflation, remains below its level a quarter-century ago.

It used to be thought that America's greatest strength was not its military power, but an economic system that was the envy of the world. But why would others seek to emulate an economic model by which a large proportion – even a majority – of the population has seen their income stagnate while incomes at the top have soared?

A second study, the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report 2014, corroborates these findings. Every year, the UNDP publishes a ranking of countries by their Human Development Index (HDI), which incorporates other dimensions of wellbeing besides income, including health and education.

America ranks fifth according to HDI, below Norway, Australia, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. But when its score is adjusted for inequality, it drops 23 spots – among the largest such declines for any highly developed country. Indeed, the US falls below Greece and Slovakia, countries that people do not typically regard as role models or as competitors with the US at the top of the league tables.

The UNDP report emphasizes another aspect of societal performance: vulnerability. It points out that while many countries succeeded in moving people out of poverty, the lives of many are still precarious. A small event – say, an illness in the family – can push them back into destitution. Downward mobility is a real threat, while upward mobility is limited.

In the US, upward mobility is more myth than reality, whereas downward mobility and vulnerability is a widely shared experience. This is partly because of America's health-care system, which still leaves poor Americans in a precarious position, despite President Barack Obama's reforms.

Those at the bottom are only a short step away from bankruptcy with all that that entails. Illness, divorce, or the loss of a job often is enough to push them over the brink.

The 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (or "Obamacare") was intended to ameliorate these threats – and there are strong indications that it is on its way to significantly reducing the number of uninsured Americans. But, partly owing to a Supreme Court decision and the obduracy of Republican governors and legislators, who in two dozen US states have refused to expand Medicaid (insurance for the poor) – even though the federal government pays almost the entire tab – 41 million Americans remain uninsured. When economic inequality translates into political inequality – as it has in large parts of the US – governments pay little attention to the needs of

those at the bottom.

Neither GDP nor HDI reflects changes over time or differences across countries in vulnerability. But in America and elsewhere, there has been a marked decrease in security. Those with jobs worry whether they will be able to keep them; those without jobs worry whether they will get one.

The recent economic downturn eviscerated the wealth of many. In the US, even after the stock-market recovery, median wealth fell more than 40% from 2007 to 2013. That means that many of the elderly and those approaching retirement worry about their standards of living. Millions of Americans have lost their homes; millions more face the insecurity of knowing that they may lose theirs in the future.

These insecurities are in addition to those that have long confronted Americans. In the country's inner cities, millions of young Hispanics and African-Americans face the insecurity of a dysfunctional and unfair police and judicial system; crossing the path of a policeman who has had a bad night may lead to an unwarranted prison sentence – or worse.

Europe has traditionally understood the importance of addressing vulnerability by providing a system of social protection. Europeans have recognized that good systems of social protection can even lead to improved overall economic performance, as individuals are more willing to take the risks that lead to higher economic growth.

But in many parts of Europe today, high unemployment (12% on average, 25% in the worst-affected countries), combined with austerity-induced cutbacks in social protection, has resulted in unprecedented increases in vulnerability. The implication is that the decrease in societal wellbeing may be far larger than that indicated by conventional GDP measures – numbers that already are bleak enough, with most countries showing that real (inflation-adjusted) per capita income is lower today than before the crisis – a lost half-decade.

The report by the International Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (which I chaired) emphasized that GDP is not a good measure of how well an economy is performing. The US Census and UNDP reports remind us of the importance of this insight. Too much has already been sacrificed on the altar of GDP fetishism.

Regardless of how fast GDP grows, an economic system that fails to deliver gains for most of its citizens, and in which a rising share of the population faces increasing insecurity, is, in a fundamental sense, a failed economic system. And policies, like austerity, that increase insecurity and lead to lower incomes and standards of living for large proportions of the population are, in a fundamental sense, flawed policies.

The writer is a Nobel laureate in economics, is University Professor at Columbia University. His most recent book, co-authored with Bruce Greenwald, is Creating a Learning Society: A New Approach to Growth, Development, and Social Progress.

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Exclusive to The Daily Star

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Poisoning cattle with harmful hormones

It was around noon. Only a day remained before Eid-ul-Adha. People all around were busy bringing sacrificial animals from the cattle markets. Suddenly I saw a small crowd on a street of our ward. A big cow suddenly sat down, it was having respiratory problem. The cow was bought from Agargaon market. It cost taka one lac and five thousand. Immediately the owner of the cow started nursing the cow. It was a hot day. So the cow was showered with water by a pipe. Air supply was ensured by installing a stand fan and a shade with polythene was also arranged on one side of the street where the cow was struggling for life. By the afternoon the cow's condition deteriorated and a vet was called in who gave the poor animal an injection and some oral medicines. But the cow did not improve rather it was collapsing very fast. Finally the cow died. Later it was understood that the cow was injected with poisonous hormones which caused liver and kidney failure.

Many more cows reportedly died under similar circumstances as they were injected with hormones. Would the authorities do the needful for preventing the use of harmful hormones?

Professor M Zahidul Haque

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Provide relief to flood affected farmers

The recent flood has damaged a huge amount of crops in Bangladesh. Farmers of the affected areas are in extremely bad condition for lack of money



PHOTO: STAR

and food. If they plant Boro, they are likely to get the crop next March. So the government should provide the affected farmers with rice and wheat for the next six months at a subsidised rate. This will help them survive and grow food again.

Shafkat Rahman

BIAM Laboratory School, Dhaka

Bring Tangail arsonist, accomplices to justice

On 6th September 2014 in Tangail, a mother and her three young daughters went to sleep at night after celebrating Eid-ul-Adha, but little did they know they wouldn't wake up again as criminals set fire to their house, killing all of them. This barbarous incident happened because Monira (14), the eldest daughter, refused to marry a man named Jahangir Hossain, to whom she was engaged three years ago.

One detainee, a rickshaw puller by profession, told police that Jahangir hired him for Tk 200 to carry petrol from a nearby filling station. We want harsh punishment for these culprits who bring such a miserable end to the lives of innocent people.

Hasna Begum

Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh

Comments on news report, "Latif claims he offered to quit," published on October 12, 2014

Sayed Rahman

An interesting man indeed!

S. M. Iftekhhar Ahmed

We don't expect to see him as a minister in some other ministry soon after all this hoopla; but everything is possible in Bangladesh.

"Graft: Shajahan, Abbas place statements to ACC" (October 12, 2014)

Hovercraft

This ACC is a joke. It will certainly not touch the shipping minister.

"What the Nobel committee says" (October 11, 2014)

Akm Bari

Though Malala and Kailash have been given the Nobel Peace Prize, Nobel committee forgot that without child labour, West would not get their cheap merchandises either from Bangladesh or China. Western countries drop million dollar bombs in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Pakistan but fail to provide hundred thousand dollars to establish free educational institution for poor boys and girls of the third world countries.

Saving Our Gold

MAHFUJUR RAHMAN

THERE is a saying "Old is gold". This is especially true in case of human resources because every resource or wealth gets torn and worn with time and consequently its economic value is reduced- what is called 'depreciation' in economics. However, it is the human resource which is unique - which turns out more with time. The issue of aged people has not been in focus so far. This year UNISDR declared 'Resilience is for Life' as the theme of international day for disaster preparedness. The impetus given by UNISDR is utilising the knowledge and experiences of the older people in managing disasters.

2014 will be the final year in the four-year "Step-Up" Campaign on IDDR. The world population has quadrupled to 7 billion people in just over 100 years. Today, people aged over 60 constitute 11 per cent of the global population. By 2050, this proportion will have doubled, to 22 per cent – that is, 2 billion older persons. Populations are ageing most rapidly in developing countries, which are currently home to 60 per cent of the world's older persons, projected to rise to 80 per cent by 2050. This collision of increasing global disaster risk and increasing numbers of exposed older persons must be addressed at every level of disaster management planning to ensure that the impact of disaster does not continue to grow along with these trends.

Aged people, children and women are especially vulnerable in an event of flood or cyclone due to their limited capacity to move. This is also true for any other hazards. Aged people need extra attention during disasters. Of the beaten track, UNISDR has leaped further ahead with the idea of utilising the wisdom and invaluable experiences of the elderly people in disaster management rather than just safeguarding the aged people during disasters like cyclone, flood, and land slide. They may not have technical knowledge that a disaster expert has but they must be able to guide us with their prudence and far sightedness, especially with their past experiences to cope with disasters. Bearing their need to handle the disastrous situation, we must take initiatives to reduce their vulnerability.

Expertise and knowledge of elderly people can be utilised in a different ways. First and foremost important is inclusion of elderly people in the DMCs, which needs to be implemented from the apex (national) to grassroot levels (ward level). There should be provision of including at least two veteran and elderly persons in the committees. Generally, elderly people (who have good good and working energy) should be given priority in the process of member selection. Secondly, during the normal situation, we do various policy and strategy work for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and resilience building where we should be inclusive and involve elderly and experienced people during consultation and finalising policy papers.

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